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ABSTRACT

The hillbilly stereotype has created image distortions of Appalachian people and culture in mainstream America, in academia, and among mountain people themselves. This paper examines Appalachian student reactions to the stereotype and ways in which students can explore the concept and image of hillbilly and develop their cultural identity. Appalachian people are a hybridization of various ethnic groups, including Native Americans, Africans, and Scotch-Irish. The culture is carried forward by oral tradition but is not static. Appalachian art forms and styles have followed local cultural transformations and vary widely. Stereotyping the culture began after the Civil War when outside developers entered the region, was a social control tactic, and was expanded and perpetuated by the mass media in the 1950s-60s. Psychological internalization of the pejorative image has hindered the ability of mountain people, particularly the young, to accept their identity, resulting in self-hatred, cultural denial, and lack of self-determination. The stereotype has also been internalized by education systems, which use it as an excuse for educational problems. As has happened in many Native American nations, reviving cultural traditions can facilitate healing. Students can confront the Appalachian stereotype by exploring the topic historically, aesthetically, and critically in their own place. Critical examination of the histories of Appalachian mountain culture, resistance, and artistic responses facilitates students' cultural identity, pride, and sense of place. Student projects for grades K-12 are listed. (Contains 17 references.) (SV)

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HILLBILLY: AN IMAGE OF A CULTURE

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Abstract

The stereotype has created image distortions in main-stream America, academia, and among mountain people themselves. This chapter is about Appalachian and non-Appalachian youth exploring the concept and image of hillbilly, developing their idea of cultural identity, and projecting their cultural voice in response to predominant stereotypes. This research reflects the negotiation required of any group that encounters derogatory protrayls of itself. For this reason, consider utilizing this paper and collection of lesson plans as a safe way for Appalachians and non-Appalachians students to explore stereotypes, power relationships, and cultural identity.

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Introduction

The hillbilly is a cartoon image, alternately comedic or sinister, that is in contrast with the real people of the Appalachian Mountain Culture. The pejorative image portrays mountain people as lazy, stupid, sloppy, violent, moonshining, tobacco spitting, barefoot, incestuous and so on. In fact, Appalachian mountaineers possess no more of these negative attributes than any other group. Virtually every ethnic group in the United States has been on the receiving and giving end of words and images that demean the essence of people. *Hillbilly* is as offensive as other well-known derogatory words that other groups endure. The difference is that many of these other images and words are being replaced with positive definitions. *Hillbilly* is not.

There are important reasons for educators to understand this culture and its arts. In the last quarter of the 19th century, missionaries with preconceived ideas of the culture built schools in the region (Ballengee Morris, 1997). After World War Two, over 650,000 Appalachians migrated[1] to other areas in the United States for work which created an Appalachian minority (Ballengee Morris 1997). Since then, mountain youth have had to cope with pedagogical styles that conflict with their traditional oral learning style. Many Mountain children have been labeled behavior disordered due to "going off" or "being defiant." A writer for The Dayton Daily Newspaper at the 1996 REACH (Realizing Ethnic Awareness and Cultural Heritage) Conference revealed his story[2] of being mislabeled due to his struggles with the negative image. Fights and disinterest in school were his responses. A famous storyteller addressed her problems as a child living in Detroit, Michigan and dealing with the image. She ran "home" as soon as she could. School was an unpleasant place and she found herself labeled as learning disabled. Recently in Newark, Ohio, a young man from Georgia was repeatedly shamed by his high school Spanish teacher for his accent. His grades dropped from A's and B's to barely passing. He responded by leaving his family in Ohio and going to live with his grandfather near Atlanta in order to bring his grades up so he could get into college. In Tazewell County, Virginia, an elementary student was labeled learning disabled and "in need of culture." This student is Cherokee/Appalachian. She attends pow-wows, sings, dances, and creates art. She has been instructed in tribal spiritual constructs and in appropriate situations wears traditional Cherokee clothing. She has had constant exposure to traditional mountain arts as well. Yet she is "in need of culture." After her mother sued the county, she was home schooled. After two years, she was tested and no learning disability could be found. Story after story reveals psychic damage when the stereotypic image and cultural identity collide. In their eyes, school was a painful experience that devalued them and their culture. They never forgot. Many cultural/ethnic groups have protested and educated society and the media about derogatory words and harmful stereotypic images. So far the Appalachia Mountain Culture has been unsuccessful in bringing about this much needed change.

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The Mountain Culture people are a hybridization of various ethnic groups including, but not limited to, Native Americans, Africans, and Scotch-Irish. The culture is carried forward by oral tradition (Ballengee Morris, 1997). Often oral tradition has been improperly translated by outsiders as meaning static (Hart, 1992/93). In the Mountain Culture, tradition is defined as a bridge between heritage (the culture of the past) and culture (the present reaction to time and place). The culture is a response to the geographical land forms, occupations, political and social convictions, resistance to oppression, social change, political dynamics, and stereotypic representation of the culture (Ballengee Morris, 1997). Narrowly defining a culture leads to institutional stagnation and stereotyping. The Mountain Culture is complex and defies easy generalization. The art forms and styles have followed the local cultural transformations and because of this are widely varied and non-monolithic--quilts, murals, recycle sculptures, outdoor installations, animal bone sculptures, baskets, glass bead works, jug head pottery, and instruments to name a few.

Stereotyping the culture and art forms occurred immediately after the Civil War when developers came into the region. They exploited the natural resources and the people, and set forth to create a secured culture/ethnic/class stratification through control of education and media. Stereotyping cultures is one tactic utilized to implement control. For those of the Appalachian Mountain Culture, the documentation of the culture and the stereotyping occurred at a time when the area was being developed and the Industrial Revolution was creating social upheaval. Fear of change motivated the modernized population to seek their pioneer roots. Writers, anthropologists, philanthropists, and collectors descended upon the Appalachian area. A writing style called "local color" developed and was used to create many stereotypes that still endure. John Fox Jr.'s novels which described mountain people as savages, barbarians, and bloodthirsty were quite popular (Smith, 1983). The stereotypic image was born.

The word *hillbilly* appeared in print, in the *New York Journal* , on April 23, 1900, defined as a "free and untrammeled white citizen of Alabama, who lives in the hills, has no means to speak of, dresses as he can, talks as he pleases, drinks whiskey when he gets it, and fires off his revolver as the fancy takes him" (Green, 1965, p. 204). Those from the outside focused on differences and characterized them as negative, then generalized the negative characterizations into a stereotypic representation of the culture. bell hooks has explored the effect of stereotypes and believes that stereotypes serve those in power, "Like fiction," hook writes, "they are created to serve as a substitution, standing in for what is real. They are there not to tell it like it is but to invite and encourage pretense" (1992, p. 341).

The popular mass media of film and television perpetuated the institutional stereotyping to a wider audience. In the late 1950s and early 60s images of Appalachian poverty were seen on television news programs and sitcoms such as the *Real McCoys*which was the first of the stereotypical TV shows. It appeared about the same time *Amos and Andy* was forced off television because it portrayed African Americans in a negative stereotypical way. Other sitcoms included *Green Acres, Petticoat Junction, Beverly Hillbillies,* and, *Andy Griffith Show.* In general the shows represented mountain and country people as being simple, backwards, moonshiners, and outside the dominant culture's acceptance of normal. Appalachian Mountain Culture has been reduced, in terms of cultural identity, through a combination of misconstrued literature and visual, movie, and television treatments--to a point where the general public perceives the stereotype as true. Recently one of my university classes was exploring this issue and a student said, "How can you not say it is not true? Have you ever looked at them? They need to come off the mountains and quit inbreeding and catch up with the 1990s."

. . . . but words can never--WHAT?

The need to examine and re-examine cultural identity and issues is not just an Appalachian phenomena. Native Americans have been exploring "Indianess," blood quantum, stereotypic representation, sports icons, Indian art, and cultural identity in general. This exploration reached a visible critical mass in the years leading up to and immediately following 1992, the 550 year anniversary of the discovery of America by Columbus. The telling of the story from the Native perspective dominated America media coverage of this event. Cultures that have to negotiate with stereotypic images which have become infused with cultural identity are presented with the challenge of not only understanding the effect but with finding ways to overcome the detrimental self hatred and cultural denial.

In *Apples on the Flood*, Rodger Cunningham (1987) concludes that an internalization of a pejorative image creates infantilization and psychological damage. The psychological internalization hinders the ability of those of the Mountain Culture, particularly the young, to accept their identity, which manifest in self hatred, cultural denial, and lack of self-determination. One Mountain Cultural artist described his youthful perspective:

> Back when I was growing up, it was during the Kennedy Era in West Virginia. It [the image] directly affected a lot of people, at least it did me. I was ashamed of the way we were portrayed. We cooked with wood and we heated with coal and had to take a bath in a damn washtub in the kitchen and stuff like that. It never really meant anything to me and I was very satisfied with it until I saw the horror on the faces of the people in the United States when they were looking at pictures of the poor, backward Appalachians and it suddenly occurred to me that the things that I'd been satisfied with all my life and felt good about, as a youngster, was probably something to be ashamed of, and I was, very much so. I ran as hard as I could from West Virginia. Now I resent the people that caused me to do that. (Personal Communication, September 1993)

As a young adult, this artist experienced conflict with what he had known of his culture and how outsiders perceived and valued his culture. The product was self hatred. With time, community support, and the mountain art forms, he was able to confront the conflict and embrace his cultural identity. He believes that youth need to hear stories, like his, to understand that they are not alone and that denying the culture is not the answer. An other example of this is the following story where outsiders' definition of the culture is infused with fragments of the culture.

> Because of outsiders' portrayal and value on Mountain Culture, my mother's generation had decided that the Mountain Culture was of no value and they had thrown it out and tried to replace it with the Middle Class American Culture. So, I was digging through the trash, trying to dig up those people who had been discarded. It seems to me, when two cultures are side by side, you don't have the two coming together and forming a third one, an alloy that is better and stronger. I observe one seeking to destroy the other or one of them clamps down on the other in such a way that the other one can't get out from under that. So the problem in the Mountain Culture, I see, is the people feeling they're nothing and that destroys you. Stereotypes are here and we have to live with, accept or deny. (Personal Communication, September 1993)

Although he has embraced a cultural identity, he did so without support from family. The foundation for his determination was centered on wanting to learn the mountain music. The art form had touched him. He believes that through the education of the mountain arts and traditions, youth will find and embrace cultural identity. In a project he was asked to start in a local high school, his results were very positive. He worked with behaviorally disruptive boys. Each week he

taught songs, music, and told stories. The students behavior and grades improved. The school's objective to decrease disturbance had been met; so it was decided that the artist was no longer needed.

For many, self hatred, cultural acceptance, and cultural denial become infused and varied depending on where they live and recent situations. A good example of this is John Nakishima's (1995) documentary film *Mountaineers*. Originally he set out to make a film about why so many West Virginians considered the place special and were so passionate about their state. But he found that the people he interviewed wanted to address issues of the Mountain Culture and the prominent issue was the hillbilly image. One college student told about being asked by someone from Washington DC if she was Ellie Mae (a character from *TheBeverly Hillbillies*). Her response was anger, "I was going to go off on her." This type of response is similar to using the word hillbilly defiantly and proudly–both are an act of self-determination.

The popular cultural and mass media presentation of the stereotypic image dominates the image many Mountain Cultural youth have of themselves. Without counter representation and images the youth are left with the pejorative misrepresentation– "Oh my god, I'm a hillbilly!" In interviewing students, I found that one of the top five reasons for wanting to leave their region is to remake themselves into a more "Positive, accepted image because I don't want to grow up and be Ellie Mae." Others who have embraced their cultural identity are still faced with the possibility of having to leave their area in search of employment. Both groups must deal with the image.

A hillbilly is . . . . and I'm a Mountaineer!

Many educational systems are inadequate for mountain children and do not serve their need for historical and cultural knowledge and recognition of their cultural learning styles and traditions. When discussing the Appalachian Mountain Culture with students, particularly fourth graders and up, one of the first subjects they wish to discuss is the stereotype and experiences they have had with those from outside the Mountain Culture. They revealed confusion, shame, and anger.

The stereotype is internalized by educational systems. Stated and unstated policies regarding cultural and learning differences are perceived as problems with behavior and illiteracy. In *The Columbus Dispatch*, May 17, 1998, Janet S. Fenholt, former executive director of the Ready to Read Literacy Program in Columbus, Ohio responded to an April 29th news headline that implied that Ohio's increased illiteracy was because of Appalachians. She concluded that "Illiteracy has many faces, and Appalachia is only one of them." In the same newspaper issue, a story about a law suit for an equity education-funding system that is being pursued by a Perry County (Appalachian region) student reveals that much of the illiteracy in the Ohio Appalachian region is due to the state's disregard for the area (Price, 1998, 1A). Lack of funding and attention to the Appalachia area schools show the lack of value that the state has for the people who reside in the region. The state's illiteracy problem is blamed on the Appalachians but they are doomed in a system which gives them no opportunity to learn.

Another factor is the lack of information and inclusion of the Appalachian Mountain Culture in educational material, leaving them invisible people (Ballengee Morris, 1997). Authors that do include Appalachian Mountain Culture such as Bice in *West Virginia History*, refer to the Mountain Culture and arts within a historical context as something to be observed rather than practiced. Studying the culture would provide an opening to explore and critique multiple historical and current perspectives. From the beginning of the stereotypic image and the natural resource domination by outsiders, education was viewed as a way to destroy the mountain people. A 1912 editorial in the *New York Times* it was stated, "Mountaineers are like the Red Indians, they must learn. There are two remedies, education or extermination" (Smith, 1983). This type of thinking is characteristic and has remained as a reason to ignore the Mountain Culture or present in a safe, stereotypic, heritage form.

Many Native American Nations are returning to cultural traditions to resolve current cultural identity and cultural issues such as alcoholism, suicide, and drug abuse (Churchill, 1996). Similar problems exist in the Appalachian region. Returning to cultural traditions of the story, song, ballad, dance, and visual arts can aid students in understanding the origins and purpose of the hillbilly image and conflict within cultural identity. This can facilitate healing in vulnerable populations.

With this in mind, it is important for all students to examine the hillbilly image--historically, culturally, psychically, the multiple purposes of the usage, and its effect on the culture and self. In the Mountain Culture, stories are told through visual works, songs, ballads, tunes, dance, and poetry. These stories address cultural issues and contain lessons on how to construct a life well-lived. Stories connect history, heritage, traditions, culture, and disciplines that address the current needs of the cultural and non-cultural members. The pedagogical foundation is connecting stories to situation, comparing, questioning, and analyzing which creates world view and social change. This style is different from the linear, segregated educational system that often presents culture as heritage-- a time capsule of past events and frozen versions which reduces culture to relics (Giroux, 1993; Hart, 1992/93; Ballengee Morris, 1997). Education based on a linear format and presentation of culture as heritage debases the oral tradition and nurtures self nad cultural hatred (Cunningham, 1987; Ballengee Morris, 1997). Eliot Wigginton, editor of *The Foxfire Series*, found that when he honored the oral tradition and asked his students to research and gather stories from the community elders, a unique knowledge about their own cultural identity, self-reliance, human interdependence, and education occurred (Wigginton, 1972). He also acknowledged that projects like his didn't solve all of the problems. He had his students confront cultural issues and used art as the connection for knowing and actively understanding the learning process through inquiry and not a list of facts and rules.

Lesson plans

Confronting the image and its many guises facilitates dialogue. From primary to university level, I have explored this approach and found positive results. I begin by showing examples of the hillbilly image--postcards, Christmas cards, billboards, visual art work, movies such as: *Lil' Abner*, *Next of Kin*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, television shows such as: *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *The Waltons*, and *Christy*. I have students write their impressions of the images and what the images represent. As a group the students discuss their responses. Laughter and anger are two immediate responses, but the conversation invariably turns to their personal stories. It is at this point that I show excerpts of documentaries such as *Mountaineers*, *Strangers and Kin*, and *Dancin'Outlaw* that explore the hillbilly image and its effects. *Mountaineers* and *Strangers and Kin* show artists talking about their exploration of the hillbilly image, cultural identity, Mountain Cultural arts, and positive resistance. The documentary *Dancin' Outlaw* serves to illustrate how producers project their preconceived ideas of a culture as actual through editing and interview baiting techniques. An important aspect of this approach is to go beyond exploring and anyalyzing content. Students were encouraged to create their interpretation of self, culture, and social action and charged with the task of designing their assignment with final approval from teacher. Some developed writing projects and contacted the producers expressing their reactions and reviews of the films. Some made editorial suggestions and created new projects that would be helpful for school children to explore. Their passion for change focused on social issues instead of change of place.

After students have explored the topic historically, aesthetically, and critically, the next step is for them to react visually. As a group they explore their community, local art and artists. The point is for them to experience Mountain Cultural art forms of their place and not generic forms found in books[3] or art forms that are labeled Appalachian such as those found in the *Museographs* (The Lazar Group, 1995) series that show only baskets, instruments, whittled objects, and quilts. These forms are important and are included, but the objective is to expand the notion of what is Appalachia Art. As a group, the students discuss possible projects and decide whether they will

work collaboratively as one group, several small groups, as individuals or a combination of all the above. Here are projects for grades K through 12 that I have collected from teachers within and outside the Appalachian region:

K- Self-Portrait-- infusing actual photographs of self and the hillbilly image.
1 - Community Portrait--a sculpture that illustrates their town and the people.
2- Culture Quilt--a quilt that illustrates who they are as people.
3- Portrait Quilts--a quilt that includes photograph transfers and texts that address their definition of self.
4- Life size portraits drawn, painted, and posed together as a community.
5- 6 Plays and stage backdrops that deal with community, history, and cultures.
7- Redefining Mountain Culture Video--interviewing community people regarding their thoughts about the negative image and their advice to the youth about cultural identity and ways to deal with negative images and words.
8- A book--a collection of stories from elders that concentrates on their youthful trials with the hillbilly image: what they did and if and what changes they would have made. The one example of this project that I saw, the book included photographs. Copies of the book were placed in the library and in the office of the principal. The principal used this book as a required reading for students who teased Mountain Cultural students. The principal stated that once she understood why the fighting was occurring her strategies changed from punishment to education.
9- A Mural--that illustrates people who demonstrated positive resistance and how that resistance served as examples.
10- Performance Art--Students develop a collection of slides of the hillbilly image and write a performance piece that educates, entertains, and highlights community.
11-12-Gallery Installation--Students collect hillbilly images and literature and display it in cases. The installation responds to the images including self portraits, murals, sculptures, and quilts. The opening includes an open forum that discusses popular media representation.

Critical examination of the histories of the Appalachian Mountain Culture, resistance, struggles, and artistic responses help to facilitate cultural identity, pride, value, and sense of place. Mountain Cultural grounding is the foundation the students need to fight internalization of stereotypes, to gain cultural efficacy, and to resist cultural denial. This type of education is not meant to glorify or romanticize but to promote a realistic view, be inclusive, and to encourage researching derogatory terms and images that are applied to other groups. At each school where these approaches were employed, the next step in the story process was to look beyond self to review the responses of other cultures that have endured stereotyping. I encourage teachers to have their students network and explore their own and other stories so the issues are seen in a global view. To see their negative actions and reactions in light of other cultural/ethnic groups in order to see the universal nature of there own experiences and feelings. Exploring derogatory words, outside agendas, the development of cultural biases and prejudice, the perpetuating sources and mainstream reactions are all outcomes of authentic embracement. Mainstream Americans play lip service to diversity and freedom. Embracing cultural diversity has to mean more than an image.

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[1] Approximately 150,000 jobs in mining were lost as were other jobs in railroading and related industries. During this ten year period, approximately 650,000 people left the mountains in search of work. Migration out of the Appalachia region created pockets of Mountain Cultural communities throughout the United States. The exodus has continued to occur in the past five years for the same reasons but the actual numbers are not available.
[2] I collected the following stories from 1995-1998 while I attended Appalachian conferences and visited schools.

[3] One book that I do recommend is O, Appalachia by R. Lampell & M. Lampell. (1989). Stewart, Tabori & Chang, Inc.

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